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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the role of libraries as the hub of information literacy in college and the need for professional collaboration to ensure library access for students with disabilities at California community college campuses. A working plan for developing assistive technology (AT) capabilities is provided which includes the following steps: (1) develop a formal awareness inventory of who, what, how, and where technology decisions are made on campus; (2) use key people discovered in the process to develop a campus-wide computing plan which includes distribution of AT throughout campus computer labs; (3) develop a policy for incorporating access technology into new purchases; (4) allocate a portion of the entire institutional computing budget for access technology; (5) determine who is responsible for making decision for upgrades or new computers; (6) decide what committees should address integration and implementation at the instructional level; (7) discover how to initiate and plan strategies with other campus labs; (8) estimate how much technical support will be needed; (9) decide how to plan for technical support; (10) determine what expertise with access technology it is reasonable to expect from librarians and mainstream computer support staff; and (11) provide training for staff receiving assistive software. (CR)

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CREATING STRUCTURED COLLABORATION IN IMPLEMENTING ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGIES IN A COMMUNITY COLLEGE SETTING: LIBRARY ACCESS, A CASE STUDY

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Introduction

Meeting the technology needs of students with disabilities in educational settings is a task that has taken on new dimensions. Computer technology, assistive as well as standard, is now ubiquitous, and the usual ad-hoc, case-by-case basis for provision of assistive computer technologies for students with disabilities now must be re-examined and formally structured: an institution must develop policies for provision and support of assistive technologies throughout its infrastructure.

Call to Action

Who is to provide assistive technology services throughout the campus computing infrastructure? This is a question faced by assistive technology specialists who are directly responsible for meeting the technology needs of students with disabilities in educational settings. What once was viewed as a rather narrow focus of providing basic training of assistive technology in isolated labs has changed with the advent of the World Wide Web, computer networks, distance learning, and libraries going on-line.

Specialists are now aware of access issues related to curriculum design and web page design, and must make interdisciplinary presentations so that other departments and faculty can be made aware of these new issues. Technology access must now be included on campuses in an integrated format.

New roles and challenges lie ahead in an education system reinventing itself through technology. As campus committees meet to shape the educational future of their institutions, assistive technology specialists must take on the challenge of assuring that computer-based instructional resources, networks, and web-based distance learning materials remain accessible to students with disabilities.

Responding to Change

In order to begin the structured implementation of assistive technology access in these new environments, a collaboration must be developed so that all involved know what the procedure is, who is responsible for what, and how more support can be provided when needed. The pivotal issue is to build consensus as new plans evolve.

One Approach

Staff from the Disabled Students Program at Santa Barbara City College, facilitating the implementation of assistive technology into their library setting, discovered that the policies and procedures developed for this activity could actually serve as a model for further implementing assistive technologies throughout their campus computing infrastructure.

Why Start with Library Access?

In the State of the Union Address in January 1994, President Clinton called for every library in America to be connected to the national information superhighway by the year 2000. As the hub of information literacy on college campuses, libraries are in the position to become leaders of Internet development because of the information resources they provide for research. Resources they introduce include on-line catalogs, CD-ROM periodical indexes, full text encyclopedias, reference resources and interactive multimedia, and other network technologies. Funding for equipment is often a barrier for libraries to begin these infrastructure upgrades. When there is an additional request to make those libraries accessible, libraries are often not prepared for additional changes required. They may even fall short on the knowledge needed to implement and support users with disabilities.

Library access for students with disabilities at California community college campuses has been an emerging process and the next level of expertise for campus personnel. The seeds for change have been sown. Campus personnel need assistance in developing a working plan on how assistive technologies can function. Libraries are a central location on campus to test people-networking skills. Success in this area lays the foundation for enhancing the installation, maintenance and knowledge of these assistive technologies. Issues of (1) who trains students; (2) who is eligible to use the technologies; and, (3) what librarians are expected to know set the stage for departmental access elsewhere on campus.

Our experience working to improve the accessibility of the library has turned up some interesting opportunities to discuss campus-wide access. It is not that our colleagues are against learning new ways of reaching students but how that is done is critical. Shared responsibility for a common cause requires an understanding of everyone's issues: budget, staff, equipment needs, required software and hardware, training, installation, and on-going maintenance.

Today, in this new, collaborative environment, it is possible to develop systems change within an organization because what has to be done has not been done before: the organizational structure is still fluid and malleable. Acknowledging and working with existing strengths within the institution is much more efficient than working from the premise of "knocking down physical barriers."

Knowing who the key people are on campus assures that procedure and policy will be created and maintained when people understand their role in the process. Networking the right people is as critical as the networking of software and hardware.

The experience of working to improve the accessibility of the library has turned up some interesting opportunities to discuss and implement campus-wide access. With the library becoming the main root of

events, other branches became evident. The resulting plan for action is listed below:

- develop a formal awareness inventory of who, what how and where technology decisions are made on campus.
- use key people discovered in process above to develop a campus-wide computing plan which includes distribution of assistive technologies throughout campus computer labs.
- develop a policy for incorporating access technology into new purchases.
- allocate a portion of the entire institutional computing budget for access technology.
- determine who is responsible for making decisions for upgrades or new computers.
- decide what committees should address integration and implementation at the instructional level.
- discover how to initiate and plan strategies with other campus labs.
- estimate how much technical support will be needed.
- decide how to plan for ongoing technical support.
- determine what expertise with access technology is reasonable to expect from librarians and other mainstream computer support staff.
- provide formal initial training for staff receiving assistive software for the first time.

As the process of implementing technology in the library came to a close, it became evident that in addition to refining the policies and procedures which had evolved, it was necessary to consider how to extend the structures now in place. The following list is a starting point for future planning.

Access for the 21st Century

- articulate with curriculum committees to consider including access considerations as a part of course proposals.
- do inservice presentations for mainstream faculty, focusing on curricular access issues, particularly multimedia (captioning for deaf, descriptive audio for blind)
- do on-going assistive technology trainings for faculty during flex days
- provide accessible Web design information to faculty and campus webmaster.
- become involved in grants on campus that address the delivery of technology.
- become interdisciplinary—make natural links to other courses on campus that are technology related--e.g.guest lecture on interface access design issues in multimedia classes.
- make assistive technology presentations to the instructional technology committee.
- be alert--know if the campus is working on strategic partnerships with outside organizations that will impact delivery of technology on campus?
- be alert—annually review the college-wide technology plan for access—is it working?

Every campus will need to address these issues in light of its own particular organizational structure. Institutional provision of electronic curb cuts to technology and curriculum should now be regarded as being no different from the provision of physical access to campus buildings and facilities.

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